DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 163 CE 030 211

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TITLE Training Vistas: Some Professional Concerns.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Economic Climate; Educational Change; *Educational Needs; *Educational Trends; *Futures (of Society); Leadership; Organizational Climate; Program Development; Technological Advancement; *Training Methods; *Training Objectives

ABSTRACT

The current economic climate and spirit of the times have fostered a period that will challenge trainers to be more productive and efficient with less resources at their disposal. Widespread attempts to return to the basics in such diverse areas as energy, education, religion, economics, and social philosophy have, together with the current economic uncertainties, created the need for more flexibility and creativity in trainers and training methods. Because of recent rapid technological advancement, it has become necessary for human resource development (HRD) specialists and trainers to educate management to the risks involved in not having an aggressive training education program. In addition, HRD leadership must expand its efforts to solicit insights from its staff. As professionals responsible for developing training systems within their organizations, HRD specialists must know and understand the nature and characteristics of their organizations and the prevailing social mood. On the other hand, they must approach problems as if they had no prior knowledge in order to develop a creative approach.

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# TRAINING VISTAS: SOME PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

by

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TRAINING VISTAS: SOME PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS


## Abstract

This article is a prospective of the training and development field that challenges HRD people to be creative and thoughtful within their field. Also mentioned is the spirit of the times that changes training goals and requires adaptability. It is implied that trainers and HRD specialists are not very flexible. Technology is mentioned as being a most significant aspect of the modern era for trainers. HRD specialists are cautioned to keep management informed and knowledgeable in numerous areas.

# TRAINING VISTAS: SOME PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

About four hundred years ago a wise Frenchman named Montaigne said that anyone who wants to be cured of ignorance must first confess it. This is still good advice, but hardly anyone in the training profession goes around confessing ignorance. Most of the time trainers are in the classroom providing information, and at other times trainers are selling their services (knowledge) as hard as they can. It is rare, indeed, that a trainer will admit ignorance of an assigned topic.

Perhaps a reflective mood wherein we question our knowledge and methods (more often than the annual professional conference) would cure us of some ignorance. For trainers and human resource developers (HRDs) the cure may be worse than the affliction (ignorance). Trainers, as well as educators, usually operate from a fixed knowledge base, and they have little or no tolerance of those who constantly attack this base. Flexible trainers and HRD people seem to roll with the punches when challenged, but they seldom admit ignorance.

Frequently HRD personnel fail to notice or incorporate challenging ideas. A narrowness can develop within organizations that eclipses perception. This often happens and is sometimes known as "being in a rut." There is a story about

a man and his talented bird dog who went duck hunting with a friend. They were on a lake in their boat, and when a duck was shot the dog would get out of the boat and walk on water to retrieve the duck. Nothing was said. This happened several times, and finally the dog's exasperated owner asked his friend if he didn't notice something unusual about the dog. The glum friend replied, "Yea, he can't swim, can he?" Training personnel and other professionals often fail to perceive new ideas, and they continue on with old but familiar techniques.

T. S. Eliot once asked the questions, where is the learning we have lost in information and where is the understanding we've lost in knowledge? And where is the life we've lost in living? These poetic but sharp philosophical questions are most appropriate and significant for all of us and particularly for the "me" generation of the last two decades. The 1960s have been called the angry decade, and the 70s are known to some as a transition decade. Perhaps the 1980s will be called a "back to basics" decade. People are looking for meaning within the complexity of a perfidious technical society.

In such diverse areas as energy, education, religion, economics, and social philosophy there are attempts to get back to the so-called basics. Many people are looking for someone to tell them what to do. Certain simplistic notions about living

have great appeal. Something to latch onto in uncertain times provides a temporary security. For trainers, a back to the basics may be the professional watchword of the 80s.

Trainers, as well as others in the general field of knowledge transmission (e.g., higher education), are now in the process of reviewing their methods with some misgivings. This process has been going on within higher education for the past five years, and curriculum changes have been made to emphasize the basics within the liberal arts. Harvard University has been given credit for starting this movement toward a return to the basics of a core curriculum and away from the wide-ranging, discursive approach to the liberal arts.

Another popular trend among businesses and public sector training efforts is retrenchment of programs and reduction of staff. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) within the Federal government offers 26 courses in what they call "retrenchment management." Such courses as Coping with Budget and Personnel Cuts, Measuring Effectiveness in Government, and Productivity Concepts for Managers are now given. There may be more retrenchment efforts in the future. In fact, OPM is now considering eliminating the Federal Executive Institute in Charlottesville, Virginia (an executive development center).

As HRD specialists we must be aware of the Zeitgeist or the spirit of the times that reflects the general

intellectual, moral, and cultural state of an era. It seems we are coming to a period that will challenge us to be more productive and efficient with less resources at our disposal (training time, trainers, and support from management).

Our national economy is now at a crossroads looking for the Federal government to show us the way to prosperity. Private industry is attempting to be more competitive in the marketplace by reorganizing their resources. The automobile industry, as well as steel and other heavy industries, is investing in automation (General Motors expects to have 13,000 robots by the 1990s). In many quarters training and education are being attacked as frivolous activities that are vulnerable and perhaps expendable in hard times.

As Len Nadler observed, "...training and education are not always the response to increasing productivity."[1] Indeed, training and education are not necessarily the answer to increasing productivity. However, educational research evidence consistently demonstrates that educated people are generally more flexible, more motivated, better at problem solving, and more productive.[2] So it seems training and education do indeed provide a means for people who want to be flexible, motivated, better at problem solving, and more productive.

A lack of education or training often produces authoritarian individuals who can only see one side of any problem.

"...the mind that can only tolerate one approach to understanding reality is the same kind of mind that must impose one all-embracing structure of power if it ever gets into the position of doing so."[3] Rousseau said that youth is the time to study wisdom, age the time to practice it.

Perhaps training vistas radiated from many sources, along with a reflective confession of ignorance, can be a good starting place for renewing one's activity and preparing for the future. Most HRD specialists do not know what the economic forecasts will bring. No one has any secret knowledge of the world to sustain us. As trainers, we do know a few things about education and organizational development that can contribute to such general concerns as productivity and efficiency. There are no guarantees that come with training and educational endeavors, but an informed, open organization is usually a healthy, dynamic, and productive unit.

The old definition of an educated person being someone who can entertain himself or herself, entertain others, and entertain a new idea is quite appropriate today. We must also retain what we have learned and mastered from experience. Academic study often exposes us to narrow views within a discipline.

Eric Hoffer once referred to colleges and universities as word factories that corrupt our youth. Hoffer would

probably approve of the Chinese educational system that requires each student to periodically work in the fields and factories. Indeed, a little work ethic might strengthen our educational system.

Those who have studied the modern Japanese factory system know that each day is started in most factories with calisthenics; a spirit of comradeship seems to develop between the individual and employer. This Japanese approach may be more suited to a cultural system that reveres a benevolent authority figure. The authority figure places considerable emphasis on pride of work and individual accomplishments. As a contrast, quality of life concepts, prominent in this country, often resist institutional ties.

About 25 years ago, William H. Whyte wrote a book (that is now a classic) called The Organization Man. He indicated an organization man is one who not only works for The Organization but belongs to it as well. This is exactly what Japanese managers foster -- belonging to the company. As quality of life concepts mature within the Japanese work force, managers may have problems keeping their employees loyal to the company.

Thoughtful persons in most professions in this country consider quality of life (i.e., their freedom) as being most significant. Trained power of thought and the ability to

look dliberately for the requisite evidence is a characteristic of intellectual maturity and individual freedom. "To cultivate unhindered, unreflective external activity is to foster enslavement, for it leaves the person at the mercy of appetite, sense, and circumstance."[4] Reflective activity is not usually developed within most training curriculums, but could be the source of innovative approaches. To some extent the approach used by quality circles takes advantage of reflective thinkers from the work force.

We are now faced with new challenges in the form of technology that make our lives much more complex. Indeed, it is the technology of our industrial state that requires constant adjustments. John Gardner, several years ago, compared America's past with the future, and he said, "Coming into focus now is an infinitely more complex future in which there are real constraints, in which we understand that our own fallibility is part of the problem, in which the voyage is as important as the destination."[5] For training professionals this sentence signals danger ahead. If there is danger in terms of work place hazards and lack of skilled labor, then HRD professionals have a big job on their hands.

Part of this job involves educating management of the risks involved in not having an aggressive training and education program. Support of top management is necessary to

a successful HRD program. Warren Bennis has related a story about one of his consulting jobs for a large Chicago department store.[6] It seems the store was located in a black neighborhood, but failed to employ any blacks in management positions. They did have blacks employed as clerks and could not understand why black militant groups were unhappy with them. Bennis explains that it cost the store a lot of money in consulting fees for them to learn what was around them and right in front of their eyes. Organizations often act on very small portions of the total available information. Sometimes the detached HRD specialist is able to introduce new perspectives for management.

Bennis, while talking about leadership, said, "The more our work makes us specialists, the more we must strive to become generalists in other matters, to perceive the interconnections among science, aesthetics, and ethics, to avoid becoming lopsided -- like the tailor who had met the Pope and, when asked what he was like, said, 'A 42 regular.'"[7] It is a tall order to be informed of the interconnections among science, aesthetics, and ethics, but the effort should be made by HRD specialists and management. Most experts on organizational theory agree that management is a social process.

Leadership needs enlightened insights from its staff. The bright HRD specialists will attempt to cultivate this aspect of the job. Sending articles, books, reviews or a synthesis of

information from quality periodicals to management may foster a questioning, thoughtful approach throughout the organization. Information from many sources should be reviewed and considered. We must continue to confess our ignorance by seeking information and being attentive.

Over 40 years ago Robert S. Lynd wrote what has come to be a classic within the social sciences, Knowledge for What?: The Place of Social Science In American Culture. Lynd said, "...it appears probable that we today are attempting to live in the most disparate and confusing cultural environment faced by any generation of Americans since the beginning of our national life."[8] Robert Lynd was attempting through his book to have social scientists become critics of society. HRD specialists must serve as critics for their organizations and be informed social scientists themselves.

What Robert Lynd said 40 years ago should be said today with more emphasis. We are facing a most disparate and confusing cultural environment stimulated by our inimical technology. Peter Drucker said that the most vivid change in our environment in recent years is technology. It causes problems and offers numerous alternatives for action. Like the legendary King Sisyphus (condemned to roll a heavy stone up a steep hill only to have it roll down again as it nears the top), technology has condemned us to an endless task of vigilance with well-trained people.

A major problem for advanced societies like ours is knowing how to maintain the technology we have. We must always be alert. Nearly every technological device we have introduces new problems. Automobiles cause pollution, and now they are too expensive to operate. Telephones keep us exposed to the world and usually signal more problems to us. Nuclear power through weapons are a constant threat to all of civilization. Air travel speeds us into jet lag fatigue. When our devices do not work, we get anxious and angry; our dependency on the mystique of technology is considerable. The opiate of technological dependency can become an oppressive master. In various forms, technology may be an example of what Wittgenstein meant when he said, "We may be irrestibly attracted by a notation."[9] HRD people are often irrestibly attracted to new training techniques.

As professionals, responsible for the development of training systems within our organizations, we are expected to know what is best for our customers. But it is not always possible to carry out our plans. We must work within certain limitations of the organization. An academic institution tolerates much more freedom than a highly bureaucratic organization. Small organizations tend to be more informal compared to large organizations.

We must know the nature and characteristics of the organization in order to be an effective HRD person. It is also

important to understand the prevailing social mood. Sometimes our effectiveness is related to a state of balance between knowing and understanding.

Knowledge, as T. S. Eliot implied, may not result in understanding, but a lack of knowledge may present impossible situations. Alfred North Whitehead said that the process of education is a matter of studying the trees in order to see the forest. We must be good at our training craft and have a sound knowledge of the behavioral sciences prior to understanding the process of organizational development.

Complications involved in training people are always present due to changing purposes of the organization and inherit difficulties involved in molding behavior (attempting to change human behavior patterns). When an HRD approach is challenged for various reasons, then more attention to detail is needed to demonstrate professional skills. Skills must be used and refined or they become dull and useless.

Thinking is also a skill or process that must be consistently used. HRD specialists must approach problems as if they had no prior knowledge (i.e., confess their ignorance). This is difficult, but it is possible to do. Many bright, creative individuals think like children when they put their minds to a problem situation. Developing the creative approach can be productive and rewarding.

It has been observed "...that creative persons are relatively uninterested in small details, or in facts for their own sake, and more concerned with their meanings and implications, possessed of considerable cognitive flexibility, verbally skillful, interested in communicating with others and accurate in so doing, intellectually curious, and relatively disinterested in policing either their own impulses and images or those of others."[10]

Now we are entering an era where the creative spirit is needed more than ever. HRD people will need to foster the characteristics of creativity within an environment that is becoming relatively narrow and barren. Our best efforts are needed to keep training programs balanced and thoughtful.

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